

Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission

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(As delivered)



Good afternoon.

We have just finished an extraordinary meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission.

NATO Allies and Ukraine discussed the serious situation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. Ukraine provided Allies with detailed information on the incident yesterday.

This morning, I had a phone call with President Poroshenko who requested the NATO - Ukraine Commission meeting. Because under the NATO - Ukraine Charter, Ukraine can request such a meeting if it perceives a direct threat to its territorial integrity, political independence, or security.

And at this meeting all allies expressed their full support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

So we call on Russia to ensure unhindered access to Ukrainian ports and allow freedom of navigation for Ukraine in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.

There is no justification for the use of military force against Ukrainian ships and naval personnel. So we call on Russia to release immediately the Ukrainian sailors and ships it seized yesterday.

And we call for calm and restraint.

This incident is a reminder that there is a war going on in Ukraine. It has been going on for more than 4 years. The Allied position has been consistent. Since 2014, all Allies have condemned Russia's aggressive actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Russia must end its support to militant groups and withdraw all its forces from Ukrainian territory.

Allies will not recognise Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea.

Russia's ongoing militarization of Crimea, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, poses further threats to Ukraine's independence. And undermines the stability of the broader region.

NATO continues to provide political and practical support to Ukraine and the people of Ukraine.

NATO Allies have imposed wide-ranging sanctions on Russia. NATO has undertaken the largest reinforcement of our collective defence in a generation. So Russia has to understand that it is consequences of its actions.

We will remain in contact with the Ukrainian government to underline our support.

With that I'm ready to take your questions.

PIERS CAZALET [NATO Deputy Spokesperson]: Iryna from the Kyiv Post.

Question [Kyiv Post]: Iryna Somer, Kyiv Post newspaper. Secretary General, can we expect any concrete action from NATO side, in the case of if the situation will be even worse than they have it now? For example, can we see NATO free this friendly visit to Mariupol? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Russia has to understand that its actions have consequences, and that's the reason why NATO has reacted so firmly against the actions of Russia against Ukraine over several years. NATO Allies have imposed economic sanctions. NATO has, not least because of the actions against Ukraine; illegally annexing Crimea, destabilising Eastern Ukraine. We have implemented the biggest reinforcement to our collective defence since the end of the Cold War, also with more presence in the eastern part of the Alliance.

And then, NATO Allies and NATO have provided strong political and practical support to Ukraine. We help to modernise the Ukrainian armed forces; we provide some support to the naval forces of Ukraine, and we are constantly assessing what more we can do to provide support and to help Ukraine. We do this partly within the NATO framework, but also some Allies provide some direct support on the bilateral level and we support and encourage that.

So, we are following and monitoring the situation very closely and we constantly assess what more we can do because Russia has to understand that its actions have consequences.

PIERS CAZALET [NATO Deputy Spokesperson]: Lorne from AP.

Question [AP]: Lorne Cook, Associated Press. Secretary General, you've often spoken about Russia's pattern of behaviour. Ukraine, by calling this meeting, obviously seems to think that this is an escalation. What's NATO's assessment? How do the Allies feel about it? Is this something bigger than we've seen before?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: What we saw yesterday was very serious because we saw actually that Russia used military force against Ukraine, in an open and direct way. We saw that they fired at Ukrainian ships; that they actually seized and captured ships and personnel, and we have seen reports that several of the personnel that were seized or captured, are wounded. So, this is escalating the situation in the region and it confirms a pattern of behaviour that we have seen over several years, where Russia illegally annexed Crimea, continued to destabilise Eastern Ukraine, and now also use a military force in a very direct way, in the Sea of Azov or the Kerch Strait. So of course, this is serious. That's the reason why NATO Allies react as we do. But at the same time, we need to work for de-escalation, for calm and restraint, because we have to avoid this situation coming out of control and becoming even more dangerous.

So, we continue to be firm and strong, but at the same time we support all efforts to find a political, negotiated solution to the crisis in and around Ukraine. And the situation in and around Ukraine, including the Azov Sea and the situation in the Black Sea, and the militarisation of Crimea, has been raised again and again in the NATO-Russia Council. We addressed it, this issue, just a few weeks ago when we had the last meeting of the NATO-Russia Council.

PIERS CAZALET [NATO Deputy Spokesperson]: Yes, please? Question here.

Question [Radio Free Europe]: Radio Free Europe, Ukrainian Service. What is NATO's reaction on obvious installation of martial law in Ukraine?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Well, I spoke this morning with President Poroshenko and he underlined that the introduction of martial law will not hinder the working of the democratic institutions of Ukraine, and will not create any problems for the upcoming presidential election. For NATO Allies, this is of course important, that the President so clearly says that the martial law will not create any problems for the political democratic processes in Ukraine.

PIERS CAZALET [NATO Deputy Spokesperson]: We have time for one last question; gentleman at the end.

Question [National News Agency of Ukraine]: The situation deteriorating... the situation in the Black Sea area and as is such. What can NATO do to reinforce its presence in that area, in the current circumstances? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea region on land, but also with air policing over the Black Sea region, including the Black Sea, and we have a regular NATO presence in the Black Sea, with naval

capabilities. Then of course we have three littoral states: Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria; and we have two very close partners: Ukraine and Georgia. And we are working with the two partners and we will also meet next week, here at Ministerial level, with Foreign Minister Klimkin. He will come to NATO and we will meet with Foreign Minister Klimkin, but also with Georgia, and we will discuss issues also of course related to security in the Black Sea region. NATO has increased its presence and we are working closely with the two partner countries, Ukraine and Georgia, and we will meet at Ministerial level next week.

PIERS CAZALET [NATO Deputy Spokesperson]: Okay. Ladies and Gentlemen, that's all we have time for. Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Thank you.